

Mass communication, personal communication and vote choice: the filter hypothesis of media influence in comparative perspective

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**Mass Communication, Personal Communication and
Vote Choice: The Filter Hypothesis of Media Influence
in Comparative Perspective**

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Abstract:

In recent years, both mass communication and personal communication have attracted increased interest as sources of persuasive information which influences individual voting decisions. However, few efforts have so far been undertaken to investigate how mass communication and personal communication interact with regard to electoral decision-making. Katz/Lazarsfeld's (1955) 'filter hypothesis' maintains that personal communication mediates the influence of mass communication on individual voters, reinforcing or blocking the impact of media information, depending on the evaluative implications of that information and on the political structure of voters' discussant networks. The paper examines this hypothesis, using comparable national election-survey data from Britain, Spain, the United States and West Germany. Based on detailed information about structures and political content of voters' discussant networks, about their media exposure, and about the content of the media used, the filter hypothesis is empirically corroborated. In addition, qualifications pertaining to the importance of differing formats of party systems are made.

1 Introduction¹

Recent years have seen an increase of interest in the persuasive capacity of political communication with regard to opinions, attitudes and decisions of voters at elections (Ferejohn/Kuklinski 1990; Zaller 1992; Mutz et al. 1996; Iyengar/Reeves 1997). This attention has been spurred by various developments. In old democracies electorates are weakening their ties to party systems in the course of dealignment processes. More and more citizens take their voting decisions without the guidelines of political predispositions such as partisanship, ideological orientations, or identifications with social groups (Dalton et al. 1984; Crewe/Denver 1985; Franklin et al. 1992; Schmitt/Holmberg 1995). In the past two decades, citizens of new democracies in Southern and in Eastern Europe, in Latin America, and in South East Asia have shaken off the yokes of authoritarian regimes that denied them the right to choose their governments in competitive elections. These nations' electorates are 'pre-aligned'

¹ A previous version of this paper was presented at the 96th Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association (ASPA), Washington, D.C., August 31 - September 3, 2000. The author wishes to thank Michael Braun, Peter Mohler, Robert Rohrschneider, Sigrid Rossteutscher and Kathy Smith for helpful comments.

(McDonough/Lopez Pina 1984: 367): they haven't yet had the time to develop close affiliations to their new party systems. In addition, the new party organizations are often very unstable and have considerable difficulties to take root in society (Barnes et al. 1986; Wyman et al. 1995). As citizens both in old and in new democracies thus often cannot refer to internalized, culturally stabilized political predispositions for political guidance, the question arises to what extent the social flows of political information encountered by them in everyday life become important forces for determining the direction of their votes. In addition, most contemporary democracies can be characterized as media societies. While newspaper readership in some countries has remained a phenomenon of educated minorities, television everywhere is a ubiquitous medium, providing almost all citizens with political information (Negrine 1996; Schmitt-Beck 1998; Gunther/Mughan 2000; Bennett/Entman 2001). But mass communication is not the only source of political information that may be of consequence at the ballots. Most citizens not only get exposed to political information by watching TV or reading the papers. They also talk to other people about politics, and in doing so they learn about their companions' political views and opinions. Both mass communication and personal communication are thus important sources of political information which may become influential with regard to citizens' voting decisions.

Although the pioneering studies of Lazarsfeld and his colleagues from Columbia University's Bureau of Applied Social Research already half a century ago emphasized the importance of these two forms of political communication (Lazarsfeld et al. 1944; Katz/Lazarsfeld 1955), the questions raised by these pathbreaking studies were for decades addressed only sporadically. For instance, the notion of direct persuasive effects of mass media's evaluative content on voting decisions has long been ignored by the mainstream of political communication research. Instead, cognitive effects like agenda-setting, priming, and framing dominated the research agenda (Iyengar/Reeves 1997). However, in recent years a number of studies have convincingly demonstrated that the possibility of persuasive media influences on electoral choices must seriously be reconsidered (Bartels 1993; Zaller 1992, 1996; Joslyn/Ceccoli 1996; Curtice/Semetko 1994; Curtice 1997; Dalton et al. 1998; Schmitt-Beck 2000; Curtice et al. 2002). While mass communication at all times attracted considerable interest among political scientists, although mostly 'beyond the paradigm of voter persuasion' (Nimmo/Swanson 1990), personal communication was neglected almost entirely for decades (Sheingold 1973). Yet, several recent analyses have demonstrated that political conversations with spouses, relatives,

friends, but also more distant acquaintances do matter at the ballots (MacKuen/Brown 1987; Knoke 1990: 29-56; Huckfeldt/Sprague 1995; Kenny 1994, 1998; Schmitt-Beck 2000; Nieuwbeerta/Flap 2000). Enough empirical evidence has thus been accumulated to prove that inquiry into the direct persuasive influences both of mass communication and of personal communication on voting is a worthwhile effort deserving further investment. In particular need of further study are the conditions under which such influences occur. Already the Comubia studies pointed out that political predispositions moderate the impact of both mass communication and personal communication (Lazarsfeld et al. 1944; Katz/Lazarsfeld 1955). Through selective attention and through selective acceptance partisanship and other predispositions lead to an increased likelihood for individuals to receive and accept information that is compatible to their predispositions, while contradictory information is rather avoided and – in case that it is nonetheless received – less readily accepted (Eagly/Chaiken 1993: 590-604; Zaller 1992). The credibility ascribed by individuals to information sources as well as their personal political sophistication and competence also intervene in the process of communication influence on political decisions (Zaller 1992; Lupia/McCubbins 1998). While the importance of such variables doubtlessly adds considerable complexity to the processes by which sources of political information like mass media or political discussants may become politically influential, this paper's aim is to explore yet another dimension of complexity: the interaction between mass communication and personal communication.

While both mass communication and personal communication have to differing degrees found scholarly attention, the relationship between these two forms of political communication has very rarely been investigated (Reardon/Rogers 1988). Only a small number of studies looked at both types of political communication simultaneously. Most of them treated mass communication and personal communication as two unrelated channels of political information and simply asked: Which one is more important? Their evidence is inconclusive but points in the direction of a stronger influence capacity of personal communication (Lazarsfeld et al. 1944; Robinson 1976; Lenart 1994; Schenk 1995; Schmitt-Beck 2000). Yet, mass communication and personal communication may not be independent of each other. What people talk about in fact often originates from the mass media (Troidahl/Van Dam 1965; Atwood et al. 1978; Kepplinger/Martin 1986; Mondak 1995). As it seems, individuals exposed to media messages often discuss these messages' meanings with other persons. Perhaps it is only after citizens get signalled from their discussants that it is appropriate to accept previously

received media messages that these can actually unfold their persuasive potential. Like many assumptions about the role of mass communication and personal communication, this idea – which can be labelled the 'filter hypothesis' of mass communication influence – also dates back to the seminal studies of the Columbia school, especially to Katz/Lazarsfeld's pioneering investigation of 'Personal Influence' (Katz/Lazarsfeld 1955). However, it has never been appropriately tested. In the present paper I seek to examine whether voters' personal communication within the micro-contexts of their political discussant networks makes a difference with regard to their influentiability through mass media's political reporting. From the perspective of the analysis of mass media's persuasive potential this inquiry can be read as a contribution to the study of the contingent conditions of media influences (Winter 1981). Seen from the angle of studies of personal communication, it aims at investigating whether political discussions, in addition to their potential for exerting direct influences on the decisions of voters, are also of indirect importance, as forces that intervene in the process of influence exerted by more distant sources of political information like the mass media.

In order to test the filter hypothesis empirically, a comparative perspective is applied. By examining the relationship between mass communication and personal communication not only in one but in several, very different national contexts, the claim that the filter hypothesis describes a universal mechanism, operating in the formation of voter opinions and decisions regardless of particular sociopolitical contexts, can be more thoroughly scrutinized. Hence, the paper analyses the filter hypothesis using comparable national election surveys from Britain, Spain, the United States, and West Germany. Based on detailed information about structure and political content of voters' ego-centered networks, about their media exposure, and about the content of these media, the filter hypothesis will be empirically tested.

2 The filter hypothesis of mass media influence

According to the filter hypothesis, for individuals political talks are more than just an alternative channel for receiving political information, supplementing the mass media (Chaffee/Mutz 1988). It also fulfils a crucial 'meta-communicative' function by telling them whether or not media messages are valid and whether or not they should therefore be accepted (Merten 1994: 317). Personal communication thus assumes a role that is functionally equivalent to the role of political predispositions. The idea that political predispositions, such as individuals' partisanship, ideological identifications, or group identities, are functioning as mental devices for screening the inflow of political information and filtering unpleasant messages is common currency in studies of political behavior (Campbell et al. 1960; Shively 1972; Conover 1984; Zaller 1992). The Columbia studies were among the first to highlight this crucial function of political predispositions (Lazarsfeld et al. 1944; Berelson et al. 1954). However, Lazarsfeld and his colleagues did not locate the function of screening and filtering incoming media messages exclusively in people's minds. Instead, they maintained that the networks of personal associates into which individuals are embedded, are fulfilling a similar function. Yet, this assumption never achieved the same status of a core axiom of political sociology, and still is in need of thorough empirical examination.

According to the Columbia studies, most voters are embedded into personal environments that are politically *homogeneous* and serve as social 'anchors' for opinions and attitudes (Katz/Lazarsfeld 1955: 44). When individuals are exposed to evaluative media messages such homogeneous micro-contexts either inhibit or reinforce their influence, depending on the directional thrust of these messages. If such messages are *discordant* to the prevailing political preferences of a person's discussants, they are assumed to be effectively blocked and neutralized, so that no media influence can occur. In cases of *concordance*, however, personal communication is expected not only to allow for such influence, but even to facilitate and reinforce it (Katz/Lazarsfeld 1955: 81). In those – as the Columbia authors believed, rare – cases where individuals' personal environments are *heterogeneous*, media messages are assumed to bring their influence potential to bear, regardless of their evaluative direction. Politically heterogeneous discussant networks are seen as something like an 'open flank' through which the mass media can get socially unfiltered, direct access to individuals' minds – a mechanism termed the 'breakage effect' (Berelson et al. 1954: 98-101). Such media influences

should be weaker than those coming about in situations where members of homogeneous groups are exposed to concordant messages, because they are not additionally reinforced through personal communication. However, they should be clearly more substantial than influences of discordant media messages on the members of homogeneous personal networks (cf. Figure 1).

Figure 1: Expected strenghts and directions of media influences on voting decisions regarding party or candidate A for differing constellations of media favoritism and political compositions of personal environments

| <i>Evaluative content of media messages with regard to party or candidate A</i> | <i>Expected direction of influence on voting decisions with regard to party or candidate A</i> | <i>Political composition of personal environments with regard to party or candidate A</i> | | |
|---|--|---|--|---|
| | | I. Homogeneously favorable personal environments | II. Heterogeneous or neutral personal environments, non-discussants | III. Homogeneously unfavorable personal environments |
| Favorable | Positive | Concordance ⇒ reinforcement: Strong influence | 'Open flank' ⇒ 'breakage': Medium influence | Discordance ⇒ blockade: Weak influence |
| Unfavorable | Negative | Discordance ⇒ blockade: Weak influence | 'Open flank' ⇒ 'breakage': Medium influence | Concordance ⇒ reinforcement: Strong influence |

A desire of individuals to test the 'viability' of political opinions by discussing them with others can be seen as the driving force behind this mechanism (Merten 1994: 309; Sprague 1982; Huckfeldt/Sprague 1995: 45-55). It may be assumed that individuals who are exposed to evaluative messages from the mass media will not only test these messages against their internalized political predispositions before accepting them. They will also compare them to the points of view of other persons in their personal environments, in order to find out whether or not these messages are acceptable. If the person they choose for this validation confirms a message, it will be accepted. In contrast, if the message is discrepant to this discussant's position, it will be rejected. The chances for individuals to gain positive or negative feedback to such attempts of social validation depend on the political composition of their social networks, since these networks circumscribe the reservoirs of significant others available for political discussions. If a network is homogeneous and the media message is concordant to its members' views, inevitably the individual will obtain affirmative reactions when comparing this message to any of his or her discussants' position. In the contrasting case of a homogeneous network and

a discordant media message, he or she will always be discouraged to accept this message. If networks are politically mixed, however, the voter may encounter either favorable or unfavorable reactions from his or her discussants. Thus it is possible that the validation leads to a positive or a negative result, depending on which particular discussant a person happens to talk to. Assuming that this choice is random within the constraints of the given structures of personal environments, the chances for eventual acceptance or non-acceptance of media messages vary as a direct function of the portions of available discussants with concordant and with discordant views.

Things are still somewhat more complicated, though. The assumed need of voters to validate received political messages against the opinions of their personal associates may be widespread, but it is certainly not universal. Several studies revealed that – mostly due to lack of interest in political matters – some voters *never discuss politics* with other people (Toldahl/Van Dam 1965; Robinson 1976; Schenk 1995: 150-5; Bennett et al. 2000). Such a constellation can also be seen as an 'open flank' for media influences, similar to heterogeneous personal environments (Robinson 1976). Individuals abstaining from discussing political matters never receive meaningful social cues regarding the appropriateness of media messages. Hence, they will end up accepting quite some of them since there is no inhibiting personal communication. On the other hand, there is also no additional impetus of reinforcement, so media influences will not get an extra boost. A similar pattern can be expected if voters do discuss politics with others, but nonetheless never receive recognizable cues from these discussants. Talks about politics must not always consist in an exchange of clear-cut political judgments. Discussants may sometimes feel uncertain themselves about the meaning of media messages, or they may be reluctant to disclose their feelings (Scheuch 1965). If micro-contexts are in this sense politically *neutral*, i.e. entirely composed of persons who refrain from expressing clear political opinion statements, they will play neither a reinforcing nor an inhibiting role with regard to influences of mass media. Their effect can be expected to be similar to that of a general lack of political discussion, and to that of heterogeneous networks.

No adequate empirical evidence for evaluating the filter hypothesis has so far been provided. All available studies failed to recognize the substantial degree of complexity that the filter hypothesis implies. A study of newspaper readers' inclination to vote in line with their papers' editorial endorsements observed such a tendency for non-discussants, but not for persons who

discussed politics with their associates, pointing to the mediating impact of political discussion *per se* (Robinson 1976). However, this analysis entirely ignored the political content of respondents' political conversations. Lenart (1994: 84-9) went one step further by trying to distinguish politically homogeneous from heterogeneous social networks. However, his study is also deficient because it relied on indirect measures of the political composition of respondents' personal environments that were of questionable validity. In particular, it ignored the direction of the discussants' political preferences. Consequently, the crucial aspect of the relationship between these preferences and the evaluative direction of the media's content was not taken into account by this study. In the following section I describe the design of a study that attempted to come closer to the level of complexity necessary for an adequate test of the filter hypothesis.

3 Data, variables, and logic of analysis

Many studies interested in the political impact of mass communication concentrate on specific media, like television news, or particular newspapers. In contrast, I looked simultaneously at the whole range of mass media that provide voters with political information and may thus become sources of influence. More importantly, with very few exceptions inquiries into the political effects of mass media have been designed as single-country studies. It is often far from clear if and to what extent their findings can be generalized to other political, social and cultural contexts (Gurevitch/Blumler 1990; Blumler et al. 1992; Schmitt-Beck 1998). To avoid this shortcoming, I chose a cross-national perspective. Its comparative design provided a more adequate basis for testing the claim that the filter hypothesis describes a universal mechanism, operating generally in the formation of voters' opinions and decisions, irrespective of particular socio-political contexts. As an application of the logic of the 'most different systems design' (Przeworski/Teune 1972: 31-46) it allowed for a more thorough test of the filter hypothesis than a single-country study, and it provided an opportunity to identify cross-national variations with regard to the nature of media influences and the role of personal communication that are due to the specific characteristics of national media systems (Semetko 1996). The study was based on a unique collection of comparable nationally representative surveys of voters, conducted during the early 1990s in four Western democracies on the occasion of national elections: Britain (1992 Parliamentary Election), Spain (1993 Parliamentary Election), the United States (1992

Presidential Election), and West Germany (1990 Parliamentary Election).² Combining parliamentary democracies and a presidential democracy, nations whose electoral systems are based on plurality and on PR formulas, with substantial variation in party systems, media systems, and patterns of personal communication, and with very diverse social structures this sample of countries provided enough contextual variation for a robust assessment of the general applicability of the filter hypothesis.

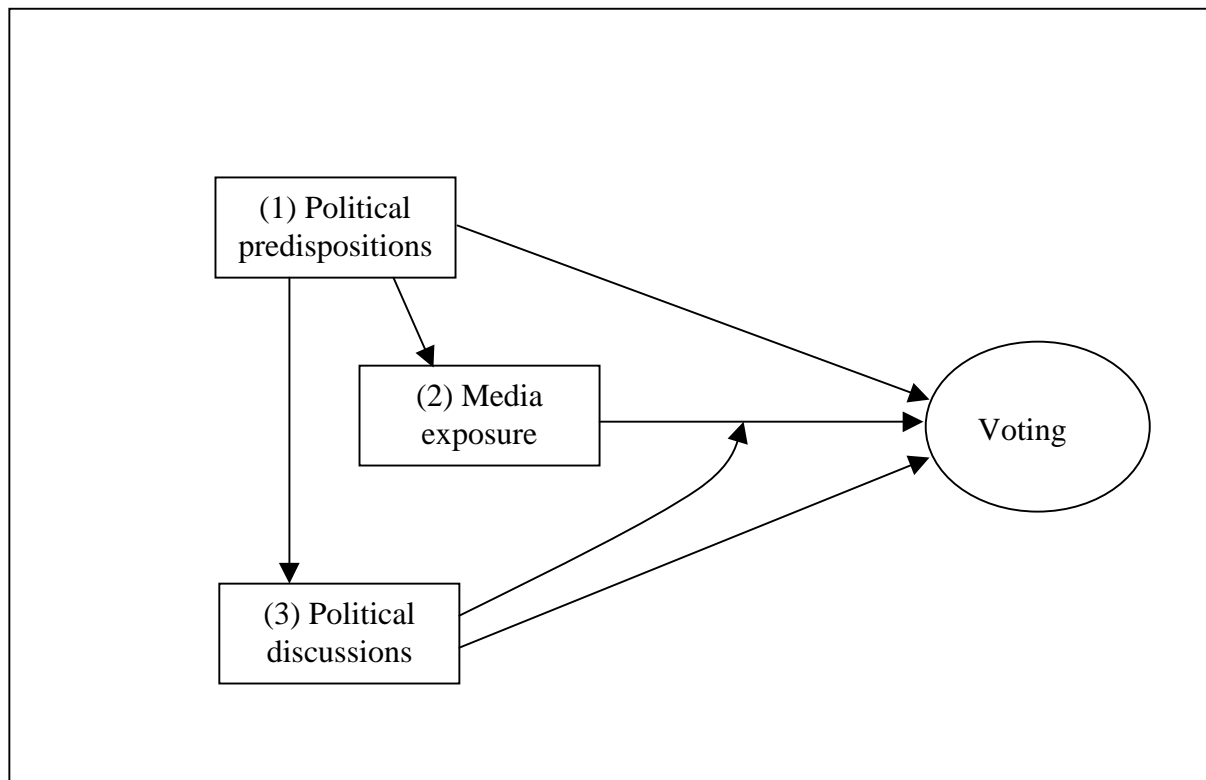
The dependent variables of the analyses were the decisions of voters for or against particular parties or candidates in each country. Due to insufficient numbers of cases for small parties, for the European countries only the large parties were included in the analyses: Conservatives and Labour in Britain, Socialists (PSOE) and Conservatives (PP) in Spain, Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) and Social Democrats (SPD) in West Germany. In the United States, voters' decisions for or against Democrat Bill Clinton, Republican George Bush, and independent candidate Ross Perot were analysed. For each of these parties and candidates, I constructed a dichotomous variable, coded 1 if this party or candidate was preferred by the respondent, and 0 if any of the competing parties or candidates was chosen. Non-voters were excluded. Stepwise binary logistic regression analysis was used to model the joint impact of political predispositions, mass communication, and personal communication on each of these decisions. Altogether nine regression models formed the core of the analyses, one for each party or candidate included in the study.

In subsequent steps of analysis, I included three blocks of independent variables in each of these regression models (Figure 2). Both to take care of the partial dependence of the political coloring of voters' personal environments on their political predispositions and to control for the possibility that voters follow these predispositions when deciding which mass media to use,

² Data were collected by national project teams cooperating in the 'Comparative National Elections Project (CNEP)'. The British CNEP survey was conducted as a post-election survey in the context of the 'British Election Study 1992' (ESRC archive no. 2981; N=2855, weighted to correct for oversampling in Scotland); principal researchers were John Curtice, Anthony Heath and Roger Jowell. The analyses for Spain are mostly based on data collected in the second wave of a two-wave panel survey (face-to-face; N=1448 and N=1374, for the first (pre-election) and second (post-election) waves respectively). The Spanish project was directed by Richard Gunther, Franceso Llera, José Ramón Montero and Francesc Pallarès. In the United States the CNEP survey (ICPSR archive no. 6541) was conducted as a post-election survey (CATI; N=1318). Principal researchers were Paul Allen Beck, Russell J. Dalton and Robert Huckfeldt. Principal researchers of the German project were Max Kaase, Hans-Dieter Klingemann, Manfred Kuechler and Franz Urban Pappi, the project was directed by Rüdiger Schmitt-Beck. The survey (ZA archive no. 2517) was realized by means of personal face-to-face pre-election interviews (N=1340). The author wishes to thank these colleagues for allowing him to use their data for the analyses presented in this paper.

I took into account a broad array of *political predispositions*. In the first step of analysis I constructed specific baseline models for each party and candidate, predicting voting decisions from respondents' partisanship, cultural predispositions (left-right resp., in the United States, liberal-conservative self-identification; materialist-postmaterialist value orientations) and social-structural predispositions (class; affiliation to trade unions; religious denomination; affiliation to churches; for American voters also region (South vs. non-South) and race (blacks vs. non-blacks)).³ Only those predispositions that proved important in terms of statistical significance were retained in the baseline models. In that sense these models were custom-tailored and looked different for each party or candidate.

Figure 2: *Political predispositions, mass communication, personal communication and voting*



The second block of independent variables, added in the next step of modelling, consisted of detailed measures of respondents' *exposure* to a broad array of *mass media*: daily newspapers, weekly news magazines, TV news programs, TV magazines, and – only in the US – TV talkshows. Exposure served as a proxy for the amount of – potentially influential – content

from these media received by the voters. Following Zaller's Receive-Accept-Sample (RAS) model of political persuasion, media influence cannot be expected to come about in reaction to one or few particularly effective messages, such as the endorsements published by American newspapers before elections. Only by means of the cumulative effect of a larger number of such messages, disseminated, received and accepted over a protracted period of time can media reporting become influential. Correspondingly, media influence on voting behavior in this view takes the form not of a punctual conversion, but of a gradual shifting of the probability of a particular choice at elections (Zaller 1992, 1996). Therefore, the exposure measures are designed to register respondents' habitual patterns of media use, not their reception of specific messages. According to the RAS model, media influence originates from media messages that carry evaluative content. Crucial about the messages a person receives from the media is thus the degree to which they on the whole favor one party or candidate over the others. In trying to identify media influences this gives rise to the methodological problem of mutual cancellation. Mass media may differ considerably with regard to the political tone of their reporting. Media audiences are therefore usually exposed to information flows consisting of many competing voices. Failing to take this into account when designing a study may lead to misleading findings, since due to mutual neutralization influences in opposing directions remain invisible. In order to solve this problem it is necessary to identify "influence gaps whereby individuals receive and accept messages from one campaign but not from the other" (Zaller 1996: 42). One way of achieving this is to distinguish media by their political tone and to enter differing media separately into the analyses. However, such a strategy requires independent information about where the mass media stand politically.

This information may be obtained from various sources. For instance, we may get an idea of what kind of political messages media convey by looking at how their audiences perceive them (Donsbach 1990). Of course, as party media are no longer important in most Western democracies and most media subscribe to the principle of objective reporting (McQuail 1992: 183-236), clear-cut partisanship is likely to be an exception rather than the norm. Still, if significant segments of the audience of a newspaper or a TV channel media believe that this medium favored in its reporting a particular party or candidate one may conclude that some degree of political one-sidedness is present. The patterns of aggregate bias perceptions of media

³ Cf., e.g., Lipset/Rokkan 1967; Conover 1984; Richardson 1991; Miller/Shanks 1996; Erikson et al. 1989; Listhaug et al. 1994; Levine et al. 1997; Inglehart 1990.

audiences, then, may give us an indication of media's political leanings. Figure 3 shows how the readers of newspapers and the viewers of television news programs in the four countries perceived these media's favoritism toward particular parties or candidates. As far as possible single media were taken into consideration for this analysis. Unfortunately, due to the decentralized structure of sizable segments of the press in Spain, the United States, and West Germany, leading to very small numbers of cases for the readers of most regional and local newspapers, the regional press could only be examined as a summary category. Insofar compromises had to be made, and the problem of mutual cancellation could not be fully circumvented.⁴

Figure 3 displays the percentages of recipients of each medium who claimed that its reporting displayed some favoritism for one of the large parties in Europe or one of the two American party candidates.⁵ Taking the example of the British 'Daily Mirror', Figure 3 reveals that nearly 80 percent of all readers of this newspaper believed that it favored Labour whereas less than 5 percent of them had the impression that it favored the Conservatives. On the whole, the 'Daily Mirror' thus can safely be assumed to have conveyed messages that were slanted in favor of the Labour party. On the whole, few media were so unanimously seen in the camp of particular competitors. Sizable portions especially of the television channels' audiences could not detect any particular leanings at all. However, certain tendencies nonetheless emerge, and they reveal a remarkable difference between European and American media. Analyses of these media's content mostly confirm these patterns (Dalton et al. 2002). European media's political positions tend to spread across the political spectrum, revealing varying degrees of 'parallelism' (Seymour-Ure 1974) between media systems and party systems (Semetko 1996). Especially newspapers often seem to occupy fairly pronounced positions in national political conflict structures. In Britain this tendency is particularly clear-cut. In contrast, in the eyes of their audiences American media in 1992 almost unanimously favored one of the three presidential candidates – Bill Clinton. Given that American media at different elections favored candidates

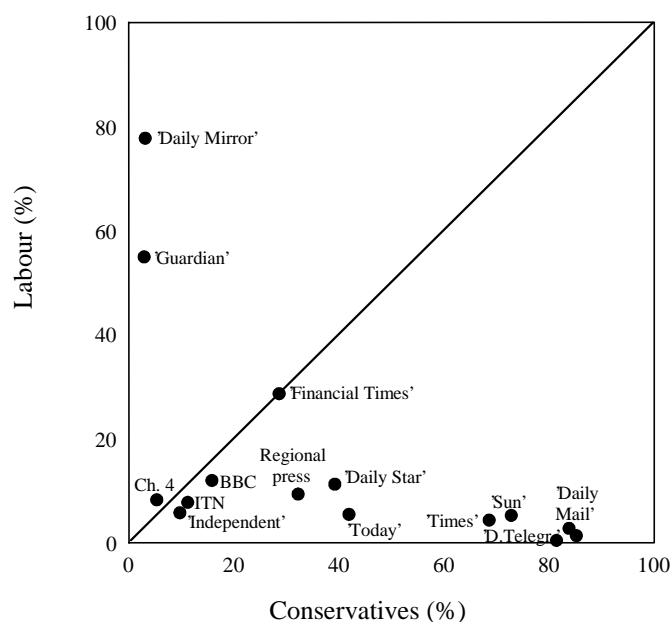
⁴ Only local or regional studies could solve this problem, but at the expense of diminished generalizability to the national level.

⁵ Very few media recipients perceived favoritism for one of the small parties in Europe, or for independent candidate Ross Perot in the 1992 US Presidential Election. Unfortunately, for some media no bias perceptions were measured in the CNEP surveys, e.g. news magazines. However, these media's leanings can be inferred from published content analyses. Such analyses are also usually in line with the audience's bias perceptions regarding the other media and thus provide additional validation for this instrument (cf., for instance, Miller 1991; Bustamante 1989; Rospir 1996; Graber 1997; Semetko/Schönbach 1994).

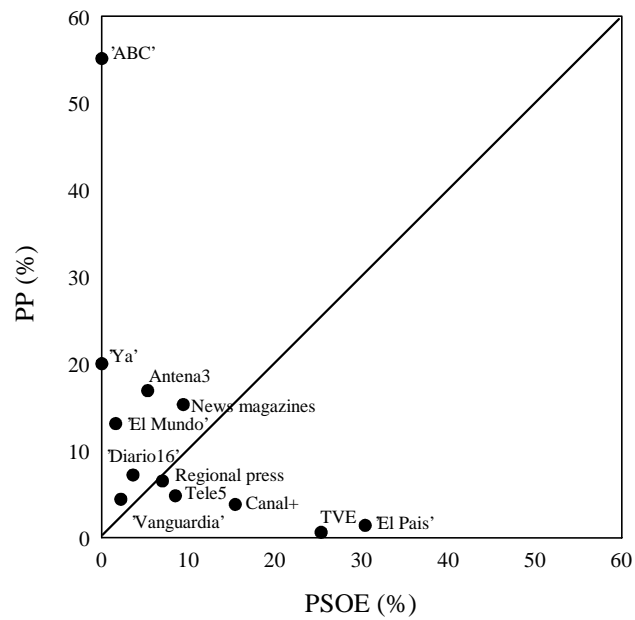
of different parties, this probably indicates not a 'political bias', originating from political affinities between media and parties, as it is obviously prevalent in European media systems, but rather a 'structural bias', caused by the application of professional norms of news value (Hofstetter 1976). What followed from these findings was that European and American media had to be treated differently when constructing the exposure measures for the regression analyses. While in the European countries single newspapers and single broadcasters, due to their political differences, were to be analysed separately in order to circumvent the problem of mutual cancellation, the American media could be combined into broader categories, distinguishing only types of media (see appendix for a detailed overview of how the media were classified for the regression analyses).

Figure 3: Shares of media audiences perceiving media as favoring particular parties or candidates (percent)

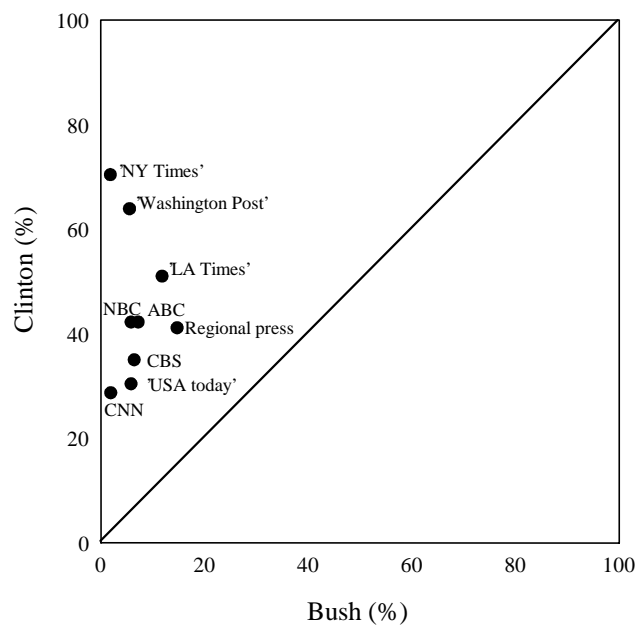
Britain



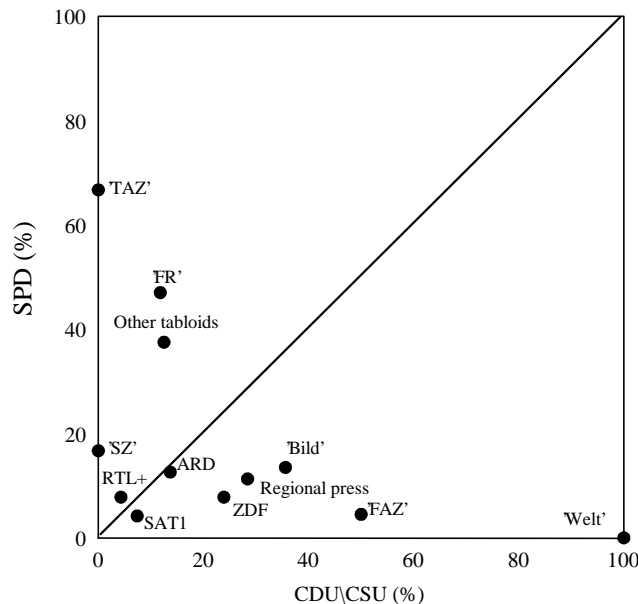
Spain



USA



West Germany



If measures of media exposure, when added to the baseline models, revealed statistically significant effects on voting decisions, indicating that the likelihood of preferring a particular party or candidate varied with the amount of information respondents' received from particular media, I concluded that this medium had exerted a positive or negative influence on the vote. Yet, all this was still preparatory work. The main goal of the analysis was to see if and how the influences of those media that in this sense appeared to have been influential were moderated by the personal communication of the members of their audiences. This was the purpose of the third and final step of analysis.

The core of the third block of independent variables was a measure of the political composition of respondents' *personal environments*. It was based on detailed information about their ego-centered networks that was registered by means of the name generator suggested by Burt (1984). All network partners with whom respondents had at least rarely discussed political matters were taken into account when constructing this variable. Respondents' perceptions of these associates' electoral preferences were used as a proxy of the opinions expressed by these persons during political discussions, assuming that discussants perceived as supporters of a particular party or candidate had argued in favor of this electoral competitor

(Huckfeldt/Sprague 1995: 133).⁶ The filter hypothesis implies that voters' discussant networks are functionally equivalent and thus supplementary to their political predispositions. Like internalized predispositions, and independently from these, they help voters to screen evaluative messages received from the media and enable them to decide whether to accept these messages as valid political statements or not. This argument presupposes that individual voters' political micro-contexts do not simply mirror these individuals' political predispositions. People who are in specific ways politically predisposed may tend to seek contact exclusively to similar-minded persons, so that the political composition of their circles of associates may be nothing more than a reflection of their own political predispositions (Huckfeldt/Sprague 1995: 14-5). What at first sight may appear as an effect conforming to the expectations of the filter hypothesis would in that case simply be a manifestation of selectivity in the choice of discussants, rooted in political predispositions. Mass media influences then would indeed be only moderated by factors inside of voters' psyche, whereas their embeddedness in webs of personal communication would be of no relevance.

Of course, this consideration was taken into account by including political predispositions as control variables in the regression models. Still, it is instructive to take a closer look at how the structure of voters' discussant networks varied by their predispositions. While there are other forms of political predispositions that are also of considerable importance, partisanship is best suited for this test since it is the predisposition with the strongest impact on voting decisions, and it is also more clear-cut since it is unambiguously related to particular party organizations. Table 1 compares the personal environments of partisans and independents in all four countries. Clearly, respondents' personal networks did not simply reflect their partisanship. While sizable numbers of partisans discussed politics only with persons of the same political affiliation, their share in no country exceeded 50 percent. Quite some voters who identified with political parties were embedded into personal environments with mixed preferences, although at least one similar-minded person was present in most of these heterogeneous networks. Even more remarkably, between 6 and 10 percent of the partisans exclusively interacted with discussants

⁶ In Britain and Spain up to three associates could be named. In West Germany the maximum size of ego-centered networks was restricted to five. In the American survey the upper limit was six. Since the validity of the measure of the political composition of the personal environments increases with the number of network persons included, the decision was taken to maximise the measure's country-specific validity at the expense of its comparability. Since few respondents named more than three network partners this does not constitute a serious drawback.

who homogeneously favored other parties than themselves. Clearly, then, nowadays voters' personal environments are no longer characterized by the high degree of homogeneity that the Columbia authors described as their core characteristic. Evidently, even partisans often refrain from discussing politics altogether or talk only to people without clear political positions, although in general this occurs considerably more often among independents. On the whole, this analysis suggests that in all four countries voters' micro-contexts were independent enough of their political predispositions to deserve serious consideration as a possible independent filtering force, screening incoming media messages, and thereby supplementing the moderating effect of political predispositions in the complex process through which mass media exert influences on voters' decision-making.

Table 1: Political composition of personal environments by voters' partisanship (percent)

| | Britain | | Spain | | USA | | West Germany | |
|------------------------|----------|--------|----------|--------|----------|--------|--------------|--------|
| | Party Id | Indep. | Party Id | Indep. | Party Id | Indep. | Party Id | Indep. |
| No discussants | 32.9 | 54.2 | 14.9 | 24.0 | 6.3 | 7.4 | 22.0 | 21.7 |
| Neutral networks | 2.3 | 12.5 | 13.8 | 23.7 | 2.1 | 7.0 | 12.3 | 28.1 |
| Homogeneous networks | | | | | | | | |
| – inparty | 34.3 | 23.1 | 50.0 | 44.7 | 37.2 | 45.0 | 38.3 | 28.1 |
| – outparty | 5.7 | | 9.4 | | 7.8 | | 6.0 | |
| Heterogeneous networks | | | | | | | | |
| – inparty included | 22.2 | 10.1 | 10.6 | 7.6 | 43.6 | 40.6 | 19.5 | 22.0 |
| – outparty only | 2.5 | | 1.1 | | 3.1 | | 1.8 | |
| (N) | (2292) | (247) | (434) | (843) | (810) | (500) | (819) | (277) |

Note:

No discussants = respondent never discusses politics with any of his or her networks partners, or has no network partners.

Neutral networks = all discussants are either non-voters or respondent is unable to identify their political preferences.

Homogeneous networks = all discussants with known preferences support the same party or candidate (inparty = same party as the one respondent identifies with, outparty = other party than the one respondent identifies with).

Heterogeneous networks = at least two discussants with known preferences support different parties or candidates (inparty = same party as the one respondent identifies with, outparty = other party than the one respondent identifies with).

Example: Of all British respondents who identified with a political party, 32.9 percent did not talk to other persons about politics, and 2.3 percent discussed only with persons who were politically neutral. 40.0 percent were embedded into homogeneous discussant networks. In 34.3 percent of these cases the homogeneous networks consisted only of discussants preferring the same party as the one respondents identified with, in 5.7 percent all discussants sympathized with another party than the one the respondents identified with. 24.7 percent of all partisans were embedded into politically mixed networks, of which 22.2 included at least one discussant who supported the same party as the one the respondents identified with. In 2.5 percent of these cases the discussants supported at least two other parties than the one the respondents identified with.

To represent the political composition of voters' personal environments in the regression models I used a dichotomous index that captured the crucial contrast with regard to the assumed effect of personal communication. With regard to voting-decisions for or against a particular party or candidate, this index distinguished between those discussant networks that were homogeneously supportive for this competitor, and all other personal environments. In terms of Figure 1, it contrasted constellation I., on the one hand, and the combined constellations II. and III., on the other. This index was introduced as an additional independent variable into the models developed in the previous two steps of analysis. In addition, it was tested if these models could be further improved by specifying multiplicative interaction terms between exposure to those media that in the second step had proven influential, and the index of discussant networks. Significant interaction terms were retained in the final models. For television this was more often the case than for the printed press, since due to small numbers of cases for readers of particular newspapers interaction terms for print media often failed to attain statistical significance. The following section turns to the results of these final models.

4 The filter hypothesis examined

Not all, but quite some of the media included in this study could indeed be considered consequential for voters' decision-making. Attentiveness to them revealed significant effects on vote choices. In all of the countries selected for this study media emerged as relevant sources of political influence. These influential media are displayed in Table 3. Let me discuss one exemplary case in more detail. Irrespective of factors like social class, ideological leaning, value orientations, and partisanship, watching the newscasts of the Spanish public broadcaster TVE had a significant positive effect on voting for the PSOE, the Spanish Socialist Party that in 1993 governed the country. TVE is a broadcaster that at all times has been notorious for its dependency on government, and for all governments' lack of restraint to instrumentalize its political reporting for party-political purposes. As Rospir noted, "[i]n each electoral campaign, public television has been blatantly partial in favor of the incumbent government and its political party. The party in power receives substantially more, and more favorable, news coverage and more opportunities to present its program in a favorable light. The government's agenda dominates public television news coverage of campaigns, the images that are shown overwhelmingly favor the government party, and the government party is depicted as

representing the 'natural majority' in the country. In short, public television attempts to mobilize support for the government." (Rospir 1996: 165) The perceptions of TVE's audience matched this assessment (cf. Figure 3). As Table 2 suggests, at least at the parliamentary election of 1993 the political dependency of public television bore fruit for the then governing party, the PSOE. What we also see, however, is that this positive effect of watching the news on TVE only pertained to those voters whose associates were unanimous supporters of the Socialists. Remarkably, being embedded into a network of people who all favored the PSOE also had a substantial independent impact on the vote, rivalling partisanship in strength.

Some other media also appeared to have been important for the PSOE's electoral fate. Before the 1993 election 'El Mundo', a daily specializing in investigative journalism, waged a fierce campaign against the Socialists, exposing cases of corruption and mismanagement (Heywood 1995: 77). As Table 2 suggests, this cost the PSOE votes. Reading the conservative 'Vanguardia' or a regional daily also went along with a diminished likelihood to vote for the Socialists, while reading a news magazine apparently helped them at the ballots.

Table 2: *Effects of political predispositions, media exposure, and personal communication on voting: the example of the PSOE (logit estimates)*

| Variables | Estimates |
|---|----------------|
| Constant | 1.81 (.31)*** |
| <i>Political predispositions</i> | |
| Middle class | -.48 (.25)** |
| Ideological identification | -.52 (.06)*** |
| Postmaterialism | -.38 (.30) |
| Identification with PSOE | 1.86 (.28)*** |
| Identification with other party | -2.68 (.41)*** |
| <i>Media exposure</i> | |
| Reading 'El País' | -.10 (.08) |
| Reading 'ABC' | -.37 (.23) |
| Reading 'El Mundo' | -.46 (.16)*** |
| Reading 'Diario 16' | -.15 (.22) |
| Reading 'Ya' | .21 (.25) |
| Reading 'Vanguardia' | -.27 (.16)* |
| Reading a local or regional daily newspaper | -.07 (.04)* |
| Reading a news magazine | 1.19 (.58)** |
| Watching news on TVE | .03 (.02) |
| Watching news on Antena 3 | -.01 (.03) |
| Watching news on Tele 5 | .01 (.04) |
| Watching news on Canal + | .20 (.13) |
| <i>Personal communication</i> | |
| Discussant network | 2.44 (.48)*** |
| News on TVE * discussant network | .16 (.09)* |
| Regional daily newspaper * discussant network | -.18 (.09)* |
| Nagelkerke's R ² | .69 |
| N | 930 |

Note: Standard errors are in parentheses. * p < .10, ** p < .05, *** p < .01.

Coding of variables:

Voting decision: 1 = PSOE, 0 = other party.

Middle class: 1 = Subjective member of middle class, 0 = subjective member of working class or no subjective class identification.

Ideological identification: Self-classification on left-right-scale, 1 = left, 10 = right.

Postmaterialism: 1 = Postmaterialist, 0 = other value types.

Party identification PSOE: 1 = Identification with PSOE, 0 = identification with other party or independent.

Party identification other party: 1 = Identification with other party than PSOE, 0 = identification with PSOE or independent.

Reading newspapers: Number of days per week.

Reading news magazines: 1 = Reading a news magazine, 0 = reading no news magazine.

Watching TV news: Additive index, based on number of days per week for three news programs per channel.

Discussant network: 1 = ego-centered discussant network homogeneously favorable for PSOE, 0 = No discussant or ego-centered discussant network either neutral, heterogeneous or homogeneously favorable for other party than PSOE.

To shed more light on the nature of the mediating role of personal communication with regard to influences of mass communication a different perspective on the data is needed. Based on the logistic regression equations, of which the example of the PSOE is displayed in Table 2, I estimated the probability of voting for each of the various parties and candidates for differing constellations of personal environments. Following Dahl's conceptual considerations on the concept of power such probability estimates can be regarded as direct measures of influence (Dahl 1957; Knoke 1990: 3-7). Thus conceived, the *size* of particular media's influence on voting decisions could be assessed by comparing the probabilities to vote for a particular party or candidate between voters who differed from each other in that they were either exposed to these media or not, but were similar to each other in every other respect. To estimate the strengths of particular media's influences, I always contrasted non-recipients to voters who used these media with average frequency. By choosing the mean exposure intensity for all voters as point of reference I took into account that media differed considerably with regard to the portions of the electorate attending to them.⁷ The news on TVE, for instance, were at least occasionally watched by 62 percent of all Spanish voters while 'El Mundo' was read by only 5 percent (cf. appendix).

In logistic regression analysis the effect of one independent variable always depends on the values taken by the other independent variables, so that variables automatically interact with one another. I utilized this feature to clarify the moderating effect of micro-contexts on media influences by comparing the probability differences between users and non-users of all influential media for the two basic categories of personal environments. This comparison of conditional influence sizes, then, revealed whether and how media influences varied with the structures of personal environments. Figure 4 illustrates this strategy of analysis, once again taking the case of TVE's influence on voting for the PSOE. It unambiguously visualizes that the political influence of TVE's news programs was restricted to those voters who discussed political matters exclusively with persons whose views were concordant to its reporting and thus reinforced its influence. Since the structure of these micro-contexts itself exerted a substantial independent direct effect on the vote, the initial likelihood of individuals within homogeneous PSOE-friendly discussant networks to vote for this party was considerably higher

⁷ All other variables were fixed to the mean, so that the probability estimates were calculated for idealtypical voters resembling the average of all voters on all features except their exposure to the influential media and the structure of their personal environments.

than among the other voters, even if they did not watch any TVE news and regardless of their political predispositions (.71 as opposed to .22). However, if the first category of voters was exposed to an average dose of this broadcaster's news programs its likelihood to elect the Socialists also increased far more than among voters in the second category receiving the same amount of news from TVE. To estimate the size of the influence exerted by TVE news in each of these two categories of voters we must concentrate on those voters within these categories who were 'available' for such influence (Zaller 1992: 147), that is, those 29 percent resp. 78 percent who *without* watching TVE news would *not* have voted for the PSOE. Among these voters the probability to choose the PSOE increased by almost .50, if personal environments were homogeneously PSOE-friendly, while the increase was virtually nil if this was not the case.

This is clear evidence for the reinforcement of media influence brought about by personal communication in homogeneously concordant discussant networks. As maintained by viewers of TVE's news programs and academic observers alike, this broadcaster's political reporting was slanted towards the governing PSOE. If recipients of these messages discussed their content with other persons who were also sympathizers of the PSOE they learned that they should be accepted. If the discussants gave no such advice or even contradictory advice, the likelihood for acceptance of these messages was much reduced. As a consequence, political messages received from TVE played a role in the decisions of individuals in homogeneously PSOE-sympathizing environments but not so in the vote choices of other voters. The increase in the first group's likelihood to vote for this party, brought about by exposure to TVE, was thus far higher. Our finding regarding the influence of Spanish public television on voting for or against the PSOE thus conforms to the expectations of the filter hypothesis. However, this is just one exemplary case and as such a weak base for generalization. The advantage of our broad comparative analysis was that it gave us many more cases from very different national contexts that could be looked at in similar ways.

Figure 4: Influence of TVE news on voting decisions regarding PSOE by political composition of voters' personal environments (probability estimates)

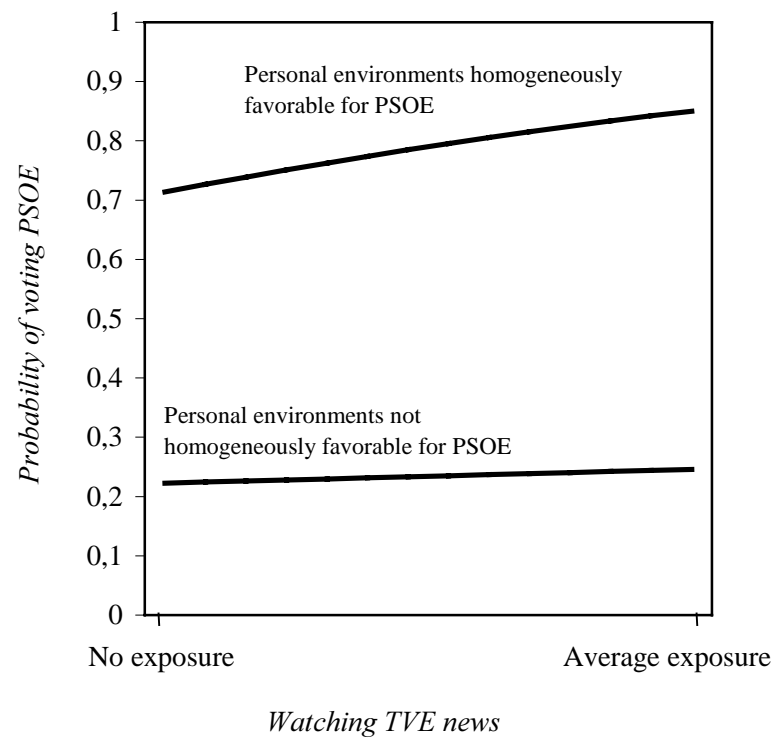


Table 3: *Influences of mass media on voting decisions by political composition of voters' personal environments (probability estimates)*

| | | | Personal environments | |
|-----------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------|
| | | | homogeneously favorable | not homogeneously favorable |
| Britain | Conservatives (N=1945) | 'Independent' | +.02 | +.01 |
| | | 'Daily Express' | +.04 | +.02 |
| | | 'Daily Mail' | +.08 | +.05 |
| | | 'Today' | -.01 | -.02 |
| | | 'Sun' | +.07 | +.04 |
| | | 'Daily Mirror' | -.04 | -.06 |
| | Labour (N=2379) | 'Daily Telegraph' | -.05 | -.06 |
| | | 'Daily Express' | -.05 | -.06 |
| | | 'Daily Mail' | -.07 | -.09 |
| | | Local or regional press | -.02 | -.03 |
| | | 'Sun' | -.05 | -.06 |
| | | 'Daily Mirror' | +.02 | +.01 |
| | | ITN news | +.17 | +.03 |
| Spain | PSOE (N=930) | 'El Mundo' | -.01 | -.06 |
| | | 'Vanguardia' | -.01 | -.03 |
| | | Local or regional press | -.06 | -.10 |
| | | News magazines | +.04 | +.01 |
| | | TVE news | +.47 | +.03 |
| | | Canal+ news | +.02 | .00 |
| | PP (N=967) | 'ABC' | +.04 | +.01 |
| | | Antena 3 news | +.10 | +.01 |
| USA | Clinton (N=943) | News magazines | +.13 | +.05 |
| | | TV news (networks, CNN) | +.24 | +.10 |
| | | TV magazines | +.35 | +.15 |
| | | Talkshows | -.17 | -.10 |
| | Bush (N=959) | Local or regional press | +.19 | +.05 |
| | | TV magazines | -.20 | -.28 |
| | Perot (N=943) | Local or regional press | -.07 | -.16 |
| | | TV news (networks, CNN) | -.16 | -.36 |
| | | Talkshows | +.17 | +.04 |
| West Germany | CDU/CSU (N=836) | Local or regional press | .00 | +.09 |
| | | News magazines | -.04 | -.11 |
| | | ARD news | +.62 | +.09 |
| | SPD (N=818) | 'Bild' | +.06 | +.02 |
| | | News magazines | -.06 | -.11 |

Note: In brackets N of logistic regression analyses on which probability estimations are based. All media effects significant with $p < .10$ or better.

Table 3 summarizes the results of all these analyses, including the one visualized in Figure 4. With regard to all mass media that in the preparatory analysis have proven influential, it contrasts influence sizes for respondents embedded into personal environments composed entirely of sympathizers of the parties or candidates upon which the respective analyses focused, to influence sizes for all other respondents. Since the introduction of multiplicative interaction terms yielded higher multicollinearity, the critical threshold for considering media effects as substantive was set at $p < .10$. It was met by all media effects on which the estimates of influence sizes displayed in Table 3 were based. In fact, most of them met more restrictive significance criteria. The directions of these media's influences mostly corresponded to my previous analysis of audience perceptions of media bias. With few exceptions the patterns of findings displayed in Table 3 are in line with the expectations of the filter hypothesis. Positive influences of mass media on voting-decisions were almost always stronger when they matched the political preferences of homogeneous personal environments than when they did not. In contrast, media influences whose direction contradicted the prevailing political climates in voters' personal environments were almost always weaker than with regard to the other constellations of micro-contexts.

There were only two exceptions to this rule: The West German regional press exerted a positive influence on the likelihood of voting for the CDU/CSU. However, contrary to the prediction of the filter hypothesis this pertained only to voters whose associates were not homogeneously CDU/CSU-friendly. The second exception concerned the influence of American TV talkshows. In line with other research, my findings suggest that talkshows helped Ross Perot but damaged the electoral fortunes of Bill Clinton (Zaller/Hunt 1995). However, as it seems the negative influence of talkshows on voting for Clinton came to bear stronger among voters who talked exclusively to discussants who liked the Democratic candidate than among other voters. Yet, apart from these two exceptions the filter hypothesis is clearly supported by the findings displayed in Table 3. No country-specific deviations from the general patterns emerged, suggesting that the filter hypothesis indeed describes a universal regularity of political behavior that is not restricted to particular national settings. Voters' personal communication with their associates has not only a considerable direct impact on their votes. It also has important implications for the mass media's potential to influence electoral choices.

5 Conclusion

Like several other recent studies from the United States and Britain, the analyses presented in this paper suggest that the mass media can exert direct persuasive influences on individual voting decisions. That these findings have been derived from data collected in four widely differing democratic societies lends the conclusion additional credit that evaluative media content indeed matters for electoral behavior. Most noteworthy, this observation applies both to American and to European media, although their reporting seems to follow different rules of news-making. Apparently, if media tend to favor particular parties or candidates in their political reporting, they may alter the considerations that their recipients bring to bear when deciding how to vote. The outcome of elections may thus be affected by the distribution of the political affiliations of newspapers and television stations. However, political predispositions play a filtering role in this process of influence: if persuasive messages cannot be reconciled with their recipients' basic political loyalties, they may be rejected (Zaller 1992). Yet, to the extent that processes of dealignment lead to erosions of political predispositions, this protective mechanism against influences of mass communication is weakened. Similarly favorable structural conditions for media influences exist in new democracies, where political predispositions have not yet had sufficient time to crystallize.

As the analyses furthermore suggest, personal political communication within voters' circles of family members, friends and acquaintances serves a similar role. In that sense Chaffee is right when he maintains that – although the term 'mass media' seems to suggest exactly that – "[m]edia audiences are not masses in any serious sense, and do not behave as if they were" (Chaffee 1972: 114). If recipients of mass media's evaluative messages are embedded into personal environments whose political preferences are homogeneously concordant to these messages they will – after some scrutiny through discussion with their associates – eventually accept these messages and take them into consideration when deciding how to vote. In contrast, if media messages are discordant to the prevailing opinion of a recipient's discussant network they will be rejected and not be taken into account at the ballots. Yet, there are also many voters who are embedded into politically heterogeneous or neutral personal environments. Some individuals even abstain from discussing political matters with others at all. These constellations constitute 'open flanks' for media influences in all directions. They will not be blocked, but they will also not be reinforced. This finding is especially robust, since empirical

support was presented not only from one but from four different societies, both in North America and in Europe.

The filter hypothesis has important implications for the democratic political process, since particular political actors gain advantage from the mechanism it describes. The issue at stake here is the politics of scale. As Berelson and his colleagues already observed, "the chances of social support for given political choices [...] vary with the distribution of such preferences in the particular segment of the community" (Berelson u.a. 1954: 126). Since every voter, seen from the perspective of other voters, can switch into the role of a discussant, the chances of voters to get into touch with sympathizers of particular parties or candidates vary as a function of these parties' or candidates' general support in society. The social distribution of political preferences defines mean probabilities for voters to get into contact with other persons who have specific preferences. This regularity is strengthened exponentially when not only dyadic contact chances of voters and single discussants are involved, but the political composition of individuals' entire discussant networks. This is illustrated by Table 4. Clearly, within each of the four countries chances of average voters were fairly high to have among their associates at least one person favoring one of the large parties or, in the United States, one of the candidates of the two parties. In contrast, the likelihood of having among their discussants a supporter of a smaller party – like the Liberal Democrats in Britain, the United Left (IU) in Spain, and the Liberals (FDP) or the Greens in West Germany –, or of an independent candidate in the United States was much smaller. In addition, if a voter got into contact with an adherent of a large party or an American party candidate, the likelihood was far higher that this discussant was a member of a homogeneous network than that he or she belonged to a heterogeneous personal environment. In contrast, electors not only had limited chances to meet someone in favor of a minority competitor at all. On top of this, if such a person was to be found among their associates, the probability was far lower that the other discussants also supported the same party or candidate. For instance, voters talking to supporters of Bill Clinton or George Bush had roughly similar chances that their entire micro-contexts were homogeneous and not heterogeneous. Somewhat more than a third of all social networks containing a sympathizer of Clinton were homogeneous, and the corresponding share for discussant networks containing supporters of Bush was only slightly smaller. However, if a voter talked to a supporter of Ross Perot, the probability was only half as high that his or her other discussants also unanimously sympathized with Perot.

Table 4: *Political composition of voters' personal environments by discussants' political preferences (percent)*

| Britain (N=2650) | Conservatives | Labour | Liberal Democrats |
|---|---------------|--------|----------------------|
| At least one discussant supports party ... | 38.7 | 28.7 | 15.4 |
| (1) ... and is part of homogeneous network | 21.0 | 12.7 | 3.4 |
| (2) ... and is part of heterogeneous network | 17.7 | 16.0 | 12.0 |
| Ratio (2)/(1) | 0.84 | 1.26 | 3.53 |
| Spain (N=1374) | PSOE | PP | IU |
| At least one discussant supports party ... | 29.1 | 20.7 | 8.0 |
| (1) ... and is part of homogeneous network | 22.9 | 15.8 | 4.7 |
| (2) ... and is part of heterogeneous network | 6.2 | 4.9 | 3.3 |
| Ratio (2)/(1) | 0.27 | 0.31 | 0.70 |
| USA (N =1314) | Clinton | Bush | Perot |
| At least one discussant supports candidate... | 58.4 | 53.1 | 30.1 |
| (1) ... and is part of homogeneous network | 21.6 | 18.2 | 5.2 |
| (2) ... and is part of heterogeneous network | 36.8 | 34.9 | 24.9 |
| Ratio (2)/(1) | 1.70 | 1.92 | 4.79 |
| West Germany (N=1238) | CDU/ CSU | SPD | FDP Greens |
| At least one discussant supports party ... | 30.4 | 32.2 | 5.5 9.5 |
| (1) ... and is part of homogeneous network | 15.7 | 16.8 | 0.8 3.0 |
| (2) ... and is part of heterogeneous network | 14.7 | 15.4 | 4.7 6.5 |
| Ratio (2)/(1) | 0.94 | 0.92 | 5.87 2.17 |

Example: 38.7 percent of all British respondents had at least one discussant who supported the Conservatives. In 21.0 of these cases all discussants with known preferences supported the Conservatives, in 17.7 percent of these cases besides one or more discussants who supported the Conservatives there was also at least one discussant who supported another party.

Talking to others about politics bears a potential for political influence. By discussing political matters voters get exposed to arguments and points of view that may influence their choices on election day. Since Warren Miller's classic study on political behavior in counties dominated by one party it has repeatedly been shown that majority parties and candidates are advantaged by the direct importance of personal communication for voting-decisions, while minority parties and candidates are disadvantaged (Miller 1956; Huckfeldt/Sprague 1995: 146-58). However, this is not the whole story. When it comes to the mediating role of personal communication with regard to influences of the mass media, the advantage for large parties and American party candidates seems even more pronounced, especially when taking into account that the mass media tend to favor exactly these competitors. All in all, the shares of voters who are embedded

into discussant networks that unanimously favor small parties or minority candidates are so small that neither reinforcement of positive nor blockade of negative media influences can be of much importance. Personal communication functions as a conservative force in electoral competition, in the sense of contributing to the status quo regarding the distribution of social support for majority and minority parties or candidates (Berelson u.a. 1954: 127). It can be seen as yet another manifestation of the rule: "Them what has gets." And this concerns not only its direct impact on the vote, but also the more complicated moderating role described by the filter hypothesis,

Appendix

Table A1 shows which media were included in the study and how they were entered into the regression analyses. For the American media only a basic distinction between media formats was made. In Europe, due to the differences in the media's political profiles exposure was as far as possible measured with regard to specific newspapers and television channels. However, for a number of methodological reasons in some cases this general principle could not be fully applied (too small numbers of cases for readers of specific newspapers (regional press in general, West German quality press and tabloids), high correlations of exposure measures for various news magazines (West Germany), no distinction between specific news magazines, television magazines and talkshows in survey questions (Spain, USA)). In these cases media were to be combined into summary categories. Exposure was measured in days per week for daily newspapers and television news programs. For the other media, a scale ranging from 0 = 'no exposure' to 3 = 'regular exposure' was used. The numbers in brackets are the percentages of respondents using the respective medium at least occasionally.

Table A1: Media variables in the regression models

| | Printed press | Television |
|--------------|---------------------------------|--|
| Britain | 'Times' (2.3) | News on BBC (93.4) |
| | 'Daily Telegraph' (7.7) | News on ITN (88.0) |
| | 'Guardian' (3.6) | News on Channel 4 (22.9) |
| | 'Financial Times' (1.0) | |
| | 'Independent' (4.3) | |
| | 'Daily Express' (8.4) | |
| | 'Daily Mail' (11.7) | |
| | 'Today' (2.6) | |
| | 'Sun' (17.4) | |
| | 'Daily Star' (3.7) | |
| | 'Daily Mirror' (20.2) | |
| | Local and regional press (5.9) | |
| Spain | 'ABC' (4.2) | News on TVE (62.1) |
| | 'El Mundo' (4.9) | News on Antena 3 (39.0) |
| | 'Vanguardia' (3.5) | News on Tele 5 (25.6) |
| | 'Diario 16' (2.3) | News on Canal + (1.6) |
| | 'Ya' (1.0) | |
| | 'El País' (11.0) | |
| | Local and regional press (30.9) | |
| USA | News magazines (4.4) | |
| | Quality press (13.6) | National news (networks and CNN) (86.3) |
| | Local and regional press (77.4) | Television magazines (88.8) ³ |
| | News magazines (57.9) | Television talkshows (83.4) |
| West Germany | Rightist quality dailies (4.6) | News on ARD (91.7) |
| | Leftist quality dailies (6.6) | News on ZDF (84.2) |
| | Local und regional press (54.2) | News on RTLplus (33.4) |
| | 'Bild-Zeitung' (25.7) | News on SAT1 (27.5) |
| | Other tabloids (3.6) | |
| | News magazines (44.9) | |

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